

Adding wings to the unbearable weight of words: Academy as Community

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The Sense of Community

As one of the earliest manifestations of life — plants of the same kind growing into woods and forests, animals sticking together in differentiated groups, men and women cultivating a gregarious living — the sense of community allowed the human race the entrance into History. The yearning for transcendental order, which basically goes back to the wonder awoken by phenomena beyond human comprehension and the need to transmit knowledge and belief to future generations, finds different ways of expression either in animistic terms or, with the march of history, in forms of spiritual belief that challenge the arrow of time and are sustained by cultural heritage. The Jewish faith in Jehovah as the sole creator of Heaven and Earth is of particular interest for it structures community life around a deeply unifying value that, strengthening common identity, endures all kinds of erasure — the loss of geographic territory and dispersal throughout the diverse cultures of the world as a paradigmatic Diaspora, without putting in jeopardy the sense of a shared collective identity. Catholicism diverges from Judaism in the representation of God in three manifestations — the Holy Trinity, by which the Father as divine creator becomes human in the figure of the Son and overcomes the limits of human reason as Dispenser of Grace in the figure of the Holy Spirit.

It is not, however, my intention to dive into theological waters, but simply to trace the thread of history of the word community which, in our cultural beginnings, may not be severed without loss from those groups of

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people who were moved by a deeply religious understanding of their existence and chose to live together in communion with their beliefs. The early Christian communities that molded themselves after the relationship of Jesus Christ with the Apostles, on which succeeding communities were modeled. An especially interesting record of community-life is to be found in Paul's Epistles to the Corinthians and all the other communities who were converted to the Word. My reference to Paul's epistles as an invoked paradigm is justified by their very nature — they are a particular instance of someone who addresses an audience and thereby establishes an act of communication which, to a certain degree, looks ahead to our age, since the Epistles address the differences in the community to which they are intended, each community in turn bringing to their interpretation the cultural differences of a variety of traditions. It is true that, with Paul and his Epistles, we are hermeneutically bound to a transcendental view of God which, however, is mediated by the humanity of Paul and, in the last instance, by that of Christ, the Son made Man.

The Augustinian Experience of Community Life

A curious secularization of the Word is to be found, of all the books, in the *Confessions* of St. Augustine. From a purely theological perspective it might be argued that *Confessions* enacts the fall, the crisis of conscience and, finally, the autobiographer's conversion to the Christian Faith. While narrating the events of the protagonist's life the quest is stated in terms that leaves no doubt about its nature and it carves the distance between the later Augustine who authors the book and the younger protagonist who draws closer to the mature voice as the narrative progresses: "Where were You, for me, and to where had You gone? [...] I sought for You outside me and could not find You, God of my heart" (*Confessions*, 6, 1, 1. My Translation) complains the autobiographer early in his address to God. Augustine's translation of individualized experience, however, establishes the link between the world of matter and that of the spirit, the first nine books being concerned with a personal life deeply rooted in worldly events and society, while the last four are devoted to the author's pilgrimage, through time and memory, toward God, the ultimate object of his quest.

As several critics pointed out, notably William C. Spengeman among them, Augustine's progress is not only of a spiritual order but also of a temporal one, and so, besides the theological quest, *Confessions* fosters the convergence of faith with the history of man, portraying the human quest also in philosophic and literary terms. Augustine's speculations in the last books not only feature man thinking about his place in God's Creation, but also entail a recurrent dialogue with philosophers and thinkers who before him engaged in analogous issues of ontological nature. As a literary paradigm, *Confessions* looks ahead to the forthcoming autobiographies and memoirs, which in a way or another repeat the ground pattern of a personal life and individual conscience encapsulated in the surrounding universe but seeking to break way from its limits and inquiring into ultimate reasons. Nowadays, the genre is in expansion, not always a tribute to the inaugural paradigm, but in many cases showing close indebtedness as in the bestselling author Paul Auster, who in the first section of *The Invention of Solitude* makes unashamed use of Augustine's literary visual architecture as a metaphor for the narrator's ontological pursuit.

Augustine's easy negotiation between temporality and transcendence is in direct connection with his experience of life in community, which "has at one and the same time both a spiritual reality, namely the common search for God [...] and a true human reality, that is, the building up of a loving, welcoming, supportive, caring and challenging fraternity" (Tack, 10). Augustine founded his first community in Tagaste (Souk Ahras in present-day Algeria) and never exchanged his monk's habit for the insignias of the Bishop of Hippo, his representation in such regalia more often than not the product of the painter's imagination.

The intimate relationship with the brethren undoubtedly foreshadows the familiarity with which Augustine addresses God in the autobiographical *Confessions*, and, by transposition, it fosters an implicit invitation of a similar relationship to the reader on the grounds of kinship. The subject of a person-oriented community life would later be developed in his utopian *City of God*, where he explicitly claims that its foundations lie in the Agency of the "kind will of the Supreme God" upon the "society of people united by the shared rights and community of interests." God, the dispenser of grace, acts on the person whose agency is validated by the community of values and beliefs. Augustine is indeed explicit about

the role of the person as constituent of his envisaged “City of God,” better said, as the builder of his ideal community, on the basis of which lies the State (*res publica*) legitimated by the people (*res populi*) (XIX, XXIII, 1954-1955. My Translation).

Ralph Waldo Emerson and Communitarian Sensibility

If Creation is drawn to more secular spheres, we are led to think of those communities of sensibility called into being in the awning of the nineteenth century with Wordsworth and Coleridge, or some decades later with Ralph Waldo Emerson in Concord. It is indeed a long temporal distance from Augustine to the nineteenth century, but one that is allowed by the shared internalization of the quest pattern, and the role of the questing individual who similarly becomes a builder of ideal communities. My focus will, understandably, be on Ralph Waldo Emerson who, as much as the English poets of the High Romanticism, contributed to give the word community a different ring from Augustine’s, maintaining, however, the notion of a shared communitarian experience and appropriating the tone of familiarity in which that experience develops. Totally angled on the “infinitude of the individual self,” in Emerson’s case, it gives an interesting slant to the sense of community.

By attracting to Concord a diversity of people that were invited to visit, or even to sojourn with the family, Emerson’s community materialized in the huge house he perhaps acquired with such a design in mind, Coolidge House, later more fittingly renamed “The Bush,” in much the same vein of “Lidian,” the name by which he christened Lydia, the second wife. Both names betray Emerson’s intent to bring the ontological and philosophical speculation of his mind to the simple, familiar natural order in which he would pattern the totalizing system and into which he invited the diversity of the so-called American individual experience. The communitarian urge drew to “The Bush” Emerson’s contemporaneous variety of idealistic and reformist thinkers, among them, Bronson Alcott, Elizabeth Peabody, Frederick Henry Hedge, Orestes Bronson, Margaret Fuller, Henry David Thoreau, Carolyn Sturgis, Jones Very, Sophia Peabody, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ellery Channing and

Theodore Parker. It is interesting to compare the different journals of these personalities, and learn how influential the communitarian background was for their own work.

In October 26, 1838, Emerson wrote in his *Journal*: “entertain every thought [...] every character that goes by, with the hospitality of your soul. Give him the freedom of your inner house. He shall make you wise to the extent of his own uttermost receivings” (117). Implying a communitarian design, these words reach beyond the subjective sphere of the diarist into the wider circle of those who would be the architects of the “New World.” Bronson Alcott who, in consensual critical opinion, has inspired the well-known admonition for every person to build a world of one’s own at the close of Nature (48), would in turn acknowledge in his journal entry of January 19, 1837, that “[Emerson’s] ideas come orbed and winged. Footed and creeping things stand in contrast to give them effect; nor do slime and puddle become insignificant and unworthy in his creation [...] Emerson is destined to be the high literary name of this age” (cit. Baker 90). The communitarian impulse indeed became a dominant feature of the American 19th century, materializing in discussion-and-lecture-oriented clubs throughout the country — the “club of clubs” being located in Medford and frequented by Emerson and his “eccentric” company to borrow the notion from Carlos Baker’s biographic study. The debates were focused on what Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his “little azure-colored book,” had described as the discipline of nature and in which issues of space, time, society, labor, climate, food, locomotion, the animals and the mechanical forces, were discussed in connection to Understanding and Reason. These clubs were exclusive and evoke a semblance with Coleridge’s clerisy, for they were attended by an exclusive group, engaged in disseminating alternative values to those of the growing materialistic society.

There were, however, other forms of communitarian experience that bring Emerson closer to our time and, even, to our own experience as teachers. I have in mind his activity as a lecturer, the only profession he exercised throughout his life after having resigned from the pulpit, and which, for almost fifty years, engaged him with that loose federation of hundreds of local organizations called the Lyceum. As a sponsor of a regular series of public lectures by traveling speakers, the Lyceum was also commu-

nitarian-oriented, with each speaker becoming a performer for the sake of his audience. In Emerson's case, the performance was seriously taken to the heart. It got him in touch with men and women who questioned his own assumptions and probably also influenced the course followed when the lectures took the definite shape of essays. As a lecturer, we are told, Emerson knew the pains of deadlines (he is quoted as saying that to get results at the speed the lectures were happening he would have to write the text in 21 hours), but even if the subject of all of them could be traced to his query on the infinitude of the human being as an individual, the fact that he was writing with an audience in view, had an enormous influence on his style. In R. Jackson Wilson's appraisal: "What [Emerson] needed to do was to devise ways of satisfying ... conventional expectations without surrendering the quality he strove hardest for — originality. Without originality there was no hope of genuine magic" (88) and, in a sense, his language, probably his richest legacy to future generations, thrives on this kind of magic that exposes the congeniality of "orbed" and "winged" words with "footed and creeped things."

The Lyceum gave Emerson a footing on the realities of the USA and taught him the value of coming out of the idealist cocoon into the reevaluation of his role as a lecturer. Contrarily to Coleridge and Carlyle, whom he enormously admired, he exchanged the pedestal of the genius for that of "Mr. America" to use Harold Bloom's fortunate coinage of the designation by which he is acknowledged as the most significant name in terms of cultural resonance. In such a role, he is not only a reservoir of original discourse but is also rescued from the trap of being shut within the confines of Romanticism or Transcendentalism, which, as he himself explained in a lecture delivered in January 1842, is a popular designation for Idealism, "Idealism as it appears in 1842" (193).

This does not mean that Emerson did not look up to the geniuses of previous centuries, his representative men, who might have been featured as models for the age, if he had not chosen to speak of them as portions of the infinitude which took him a life to pursue. They were the subject of seven different lectures which would be published in 1850, each man a representative of a given discipline: Plato for philosophy, Swedenborg for mysticism, Montaigne for skepticism, Shakespeare for poetry; Napoleon for worldliness; Goethe for writing. In portraying each one of them as a

fixed identity, almost a typology of a sort, he was probably also measuring their roles against his own role as a lecturer and a man and, more generally, they admirably fitted in his description of the circumstances of life at the core of "Experience," in one of the central *Essays of The Second Series*, published in 1844 when the romance with Transcendentalism was over:

The secret of illusoriness is in the necessity of a succession of moods or objects. Gladly we would anchor, but the anchorage is quicksand. This onward trick of nature is too strong for us: *Pero si muove*. When, at night, I look at the moon and stars, I seem stationary, and they to hurry. Our love of the real draws us to permanence, but health of body consists in circulation, and sanity of mind in variety or facility of association. We need change of objects. Dedication to one thought is quickly odious. (476)

From his own experience of journeying around the whole country for his lectures, Emerson apprehended the value of movement subject to the orders of actual time and space. A trickster with language, which he rehearses in contact with his various communities of listeners, he furthermore invites words and borrows thoughts from his elected representative men as well as from many other literary sources, winning the copyright for the cross-cultural dialogue that would become a feature of the American literary text.

This brief x-ray of the word "community" as mediated by the Augustinian and Emersonian experiences aims to show the flexibility of a concept that as many others in our human experience is shaped by the usages of time without losing the kernel of sense already present in the Latin word *communitate*. Interestingly, when the paradigm is given an extended sense in Augustine's *City of God*, it also fares well among the utopian socialist reformers, namely Orestes Bronson who, together with Charles Dana and George Ripley, tried in vain to attract Emerson to the experimental Fourierist community of Brook Farm. But Emerson felt that utopian communities were thousands of miles away from the world of circumstances and the reformist zeal which determined his involvement in the cause of the Cherokee Indians and the issue of slavery.

Off-Springs of the Communitarian Paradigm

If we transpose the image of community from the cultural into the literary sphere, as Augustine and Emerson did in their different but eminently autobiographical ways, we cannot fail to acknowledge the fortune of the concept in American Literature. Melville's Pequod in *Moby Dick; or the Whale* (1851) is the classic illustration of a specular community which is also a metaphor for the nation at large. Ship wreckage as a result of the tragic pride of humanity is hardly compensated by the single survival of the narrator to tell the story. Melville's pessimistic depiction of the "community of the doomed race" takes on a still grimmer view in *The Confidence Man* (1857), an allegorical fiction of the defeat of Charity, one of the three cardinal virtues of Christianity, by an artful, devilish trickster disguised as an ordinary passenger. Katherine Ann Porter's *Ship of Fools* would in 1962 return to the use of the allegorical community doomed by the foolishness of the crew and passengers alike, throwing a backward glance on the rising of Nazism and its devastating effect on the rest of the world. A much more optimistic view is rendered in the utopian romances, namely in Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* (1888) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915). Bellamy's idealized community represents cooperativism as an alternative system to unbridled competition, whereas Gilman's shifts the angle to that of a community based on gender difference, depicting an ideal world under the rule of women. I invoke these literary representations of community, in as far as they possibly exerted as much influence in their contemporaneous society as Emerson's lectures and Essays, inspiring women and men to reform and be aware of the need for societal change.

The strong communitarian appeal in the United States surfaces, again, in Walt Whitman's use of symbolic communities — as if they might harbor the multitudes that people the American nation — in *Leaves of Grass* (1855), the volume of poems that earned the admiration of Emerson and, in turn, earned Whitman the public recognition of his role as the awaited-for "American Poet." The overpowering impact of the communitarian image would find an objective correlative in Hart Crane's 1932 lyrical craving for the "visionary company of love" in "The Broken Tower" (106), or in Adrienne Rich's extended invitation to the exiled Rosa

Luxembourg and the murdered Anna Mae Aquash to the almanac of the North American time where Julia de Burgos in 1983 had written: *“that my grandfather was a slave/ is my grief; had he been a master/ that would have been my shame”* (36).

The marks of gender, race, ethnic and class differences are, nevertheless, as variedly inscribed in the North-American time as that communitarian side which gave rise to the renaissance of the so-called ethnic cultures — and I have in mind the diversity of arts — not only literature, but also music, the visual arts, cinema and many other expressions of cultural and cross-cultural artistic achievement. The cultural impact and presence of distinguishing communitarian influences may be surmised in a couple of rhetorical questions: how would have American music fared without the jazz communities of New Orleans? How would it have fared without George Gershwin, Ray Charles, Aaron Copland, Edward Varese, Billie Holiday, Wynton Marsalis or Leonard Bernstein? Without the Black Mountain Community would there be a place for that early interdisciplinary cross-fertilization that gives birth to dance, music and poetry of a distinctive sort? Without the New York School would American painting have ever reached the monumental assertion to which Pop Culture responds?

A Personal Angle on Communitarian Experience and Associativism

The gap between the senses of community in this 21st century of ours, marked by the accelerated adhesion to the virtual world and the explosion of technologies, is or will be, I am afraid, much wider than that between ours and the Augustinian’s sense. At a time of speeded changes and sensibility shifts of every kind, it is wise to acknowledge a gap of a different kind, probably fostered by the tentative replacement of Emersonian understanding by technological know-how. With an already long history that, perhaps, began with the hierarchization of literary studies and the subsequent radicalization of knowledge between the humanistic and the scientific fields, we have been definitely affected — and I am speaking as a researcher integrated in FCT — by the supremacy of the scientific paradigm over

the humanistic. With this in mind, it is highly desirable that to the contemporary tendency to value the training of excellent professional agents is added the perception that the divorce from the so-called historical project for a humanity-oriented culture may, in the long run, become a suicidal pact.

A 2008 document authored by Geoffrey Boulton and Colin Lucas, entitled “What are universities for?” led to optimistic expectations about the place of the Humanities in the general frame of Higher Education. After taking into account issues about university governance, sustainability and accountability, the conclusive remarks of the authors, in first place, highlight the necessity to envisage the University as a totality in which the humanities and the social sciences play a distinctive complementary role in relation to science, including the so-named hard-core science. The second point offers the rationale for such a conclusion. And I quote “[...] the instinct to understand, to find meaning, to map oneself and one’s actions and the world is essentially human.” As essentially human is, I would add, the notion that bringing the university into the dynamics of a shared perception of its nature, it is and will always be part of the development process, in other words the progress in Higher Education. Whatever the direction in which our sense of community grows, knowledge and experience lead me to believe that the shared creative impulse fostered by community-life has not been exhausted in the legacies from the past and will legitimate the present by the audacity and creativity of the choices.

It is also my belief that associativism may play an important part as a particular instance of communitarian action. As a founding member of our Association, I shall finish my essay by offering a memoir about the origins of the Portuguese Association for Anglo-American Studies / Associação Portuguesa de Estudos Anglo Americanos — APEAA, by going back to a circumstance that determined our existence as a group of associates: the arrival of Juliet Antunes, the Cultural Attaché of the American Embassy in Lisbon. It was a kind of golden Age, when the United States Administration was so worried because of the 25th of April Revolution that they sent what they considered to be their best staff, for fear of losing Portugal to the Communist influence. Juliet Antunes was indeed distinguished and very intent on conscience-raising. She came directly from London where she held the same office, and was appalled at

finding such a diminutive number of Portuguese scholars interested in pursuing a career in American Studies. She had met with Irene Ramalho Sousa Santos in the United States before her arrival, and was so impressed by her that she jumped to the conclusion that there must be a flourishing Department working under her surveillance in Portugal. The American scene at the Portuguese University held her speechless for a brief while. We were indeed very few, but willing! Juliet was not, however, of an easily discouraged nature. In April 1978, she invited me, Isabel Caldeira and Carlos Azevedo to attend the Norwich meeting of the European Association for American Studies at the University of East Anglia, and a couple of months later it was the turn of António Jorge Gonçalves Rodrigues and Leonor Telles, both founding members of this Association, to attend an American Studies meeting in Seville. In November 1979, she promoted an American Studies journey at the American Cultural Center, attended by members from Universidade de Coimbra, Universidade de Lisboa and Universidade Nova de Lisboa. Colleagues associated to departmental English sections were also invited. The late Malcolm Bradbury, an English professor and writer, who was very much linked to American Studies at the University of East Anglia and to the European Association for American Studies, was the lecturer invited for the occasion. The idea of a mixed Association of American and English Studies, similar to the Spanish, was then conceived, the first official meeting having taken place in Coimbra, in May 1980, and the second in Lisbon, in October-November of the same year. By the end of the Coimbra Meeting, the regulating statutes of the Association were voted and the first President elected. Juliet Antunes, actually Professor Juliet Antunes who teaches at the Georgetown University, Washington DC, was very happy on the occasion, her broad smile betraying the feeling of an accomplished mission. This is an evocative and long-due acknowledgement of her involvement in American Studies in Portugal and the foundation of our Association. Having started with a salutation to Juliet Antunes, I also wish to evoke two prematurely departed colleagues who highly contributed to the shape and orientation of the Portuguese Association. They were Professor Fernando Mello Moser, the first elected president of APEAA, and Hédio Osvaldo Alves who, some years later, was elected to the same position. They were both linked to English Studies whose membership always over-numbered the American counterpart, but

what I wish to emphasize in these two personalities is their humanitarian outlook on life as well as their incommensurable willingness to come forward with the most beneficial propositions concerning the interest of their colleagues. They will always be associated in my mind to the golden age of APEAA, when we shared our, in many cases, incipient knowledge during the sessions and, once these were over, we cultivated friendly enduring relationships with our colleagues from the different universities of the country. Our second President, fortunately in very good health, Professor Maria Irene Ramalho Sousa Santos, the recipient of several international honors, was also vice-president of the European Association for American Studies and did not fall behind Fernando Mello Moser and Hélios Osvaldo Alves where willingness to help younger colleagues was concerned. In my case, I may mention her invitation to stay at her home in Coimbra and make use of her excellent book collection when I was researching for the Ph.D.

On a concluding note, it is my belief that associativism branches out of the same tree as the communitarian enterprise. It generates an interest in dialogue, fosters cross-fertilization of projects, and furthers research and creative partnership. This may happen both at the national and international level, each time meetings and conferences are organized by APEAA, EAAS or ESSE, bringing together scholars and students committed to the inquiry on American or English Studies. Such meetings offer the opportunity to exchange ideas, assess differences and advance knowledge. Simultaneously, they may also propitiate the acquaintance with other colleagues whose pursuit of similar interests and goals awakens in us the sentiment that the road we have taken is not solitary but intriguing and demanding. This is the real province of associativism. It is, I dare say, a predisposition to share and commune with the other. Even if it may sound a little outmoded, it still provides a lasting rampart against the individualistic ethos and the assault on the values upon which men and women may grow, as they did in the past and hopefully will do in the future, to the best of their potential and intellectual achievement.

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ABSTRACT

By probing into the Latin word *communitate* this essay first considers possible deviations from the original meaning in order to link it to the specific field of English and American Studies and, afterwards, proposes to evaluate its accommodation to new modes of conscience throughout the changing times. Some key figures will be mentioned but the mainstay of the argument will be built around Ralph Waldo Emerson who, as an “American scholar”, has made some excellent inroads into the relationship of the self with his /her community, and on how much human creativity depends on this relationship. This will be illustrated by reference to a diversity of writers and other artists whose achievements are strongly imbued with the sense of the self at work within the community, this same sense being then explored in association with creativity and the notions of academy and associativism.

I will, finally, switch from this more speculative instance of my essay to the history of APEAA. Ever since the thirty four plus something years of this Association’s foundation/existence, it has afforded a practical example of how the Humanities, as practiced in our field of studies, may achieve their goals with a little imagination and a good measure of willingness. The example of some of the founding figures of APEAA, the innovative paths they were able to launch and which we are nowadays pursuing, have certainly heralded the future capability to make the most of this Association’s potential and its role as a meeting place, which, at different levels (national and international) provide the opportunity for a fruitful dialogue among the variety of disciplines and methodological preferences of its members.

KEYWORDS

Community; Academy; Ralph Waldo Emerson; Associativism; The Portuguese Association for Anglo-American Studies (APEAA)

RESUMO

Auscultando o vocábulo latino *communitate*, o ensaio debruça-se sobre possíveis desvios ao sentido original do mesmo, de forma a correlacioná-lo com as áreas dos Estudos Ingleses e Americanos, para, de seguida, avaliar a sua adequação a novos modos de consciência ao correr das mudanças operadas em diferentes períodos da história humana. Serão referidas algumas figuras-chave, mas o cerne do argumento foca compreensivelmente Ralph Waldo Emerson que, na sua qualidade de “académico americano”, se entregou a uma séria reflexão sobre as relações do indivíduo em vida comunitária e como essas relações haviam de influenciar a sua própria criatividade. Ilustrado por referência a uma diversidade de escritores e outros artistas, este mesmo sentimento virá a ser explorado em ligação com a criatividade e as noções de vida académica e associativa.

Observações de ordem mais especulativa darão lugar a considerações concretas sobre o historial da APEAA na parte final do ensaio. A partir da sua fundação e ao longo dos seus trinta e vários anos de existência, esta Associação tem vindo a oferecer um bom exemplo de como as Humanidades, tal como são postas em prática nas nossas áreas de estudo, conseguem alcançar os seus propósitos com um pouco de imaginação e alguma dose de boa vontade. O exemplo de algumas das figuras fundadoras da APEAA, os caminhos inovadores que encetaram e que nós nos dispusemos a prosseguir, desde logo anunciaram a possibilidade de tirar o maior partido possível das potencialidades desta Associação em tempos vindouros, bem como o seu papel, tanto a nível nacional como internacional, enquanto lugar de encontro e oferta de oportunidade para um diálogo frutuoso entre a variedade de disciplinas e a diversidade de preferências dos seus membros.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Comunidade; Academia; Ralph Waldo Emerson; Associativismo; Associação Portuguesa de Estudos Anglo-Americanos (APEAA)
